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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 28 (2011) 45 – 49

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

WCETR 2011

Promoting Learning Environment and Attitude towards Change among Secondary School Principals in Pahang Malaysia: Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the learning environment in schools that influence teaching and learning. Schools with positive learning environment can enhance academic excellence. Findings from literature have proven that principals have responsibilities to promote learning environment in schools. This study tries to explore the practice of instructional leaders in promoting the learning environment, based on six dimensions, which include protecting instructional time, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, promoting professional development, providing incentives for learning and having high expectations. This study also focuses on the relationship between promoting learning environment and attitude towards change based on the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects. Questionnaires were distributed to 161 secondary schools teachers in Pahang, Malaysia. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 11.0 in the form of mean, standard deviation and correlation. Findings of the study indicate that principals promote positive learning environment in schools and majority of them are positive about implementing changes in schools. These findings imply that principals possess positive attitude towards change, thus will promote positive learning environment in schools.

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Keywords: promoting learning environment, attitude towards change, principal, teachers';

1. Introduction

Malaysian education system has been reformed since the independence and has undergone various changes to suit the Malaysians' needs. School effectiveness was one of the concepts introduced in early 1995 by the Ministry of Malaysian Education, highlighting eleven characteristics introduced by Mertimore (1995). Effective schools emphasize the concept of principals as instructional leaders to create an effective school climate. Hoy and Miskel (in Pretorius and Villiers, 2009) describe school climate as the heart and soul of a school, the psychological and institutional attributes that make the school has a personality. It is relatively survived and experienced by all members, which explains the collective perception of behavioural routine that influences the attitudes and behaviour in the school. According to CDC (2009), the learning environment is a good school environment where the environment is comfortable, quiet, friendly and cheerful, with a seamless learning.

Therefore it is important that schools accept and embrace changes in order to move in line with the current global changes. Principals need to face challenges and changes in the new vision for the success of the organization

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(Azahari Salleh 2002). According to Hatch (2009), change is natural and cannot be controlled, and change occurs when there is economic development, climate change and technological advancement. On top of this, Busher (2006) agrees that school environment is a strategic place to start the effort to make changes. This is due to the existence of the school culture, social interaction between individuals and knowledge building through teaching and learning. Thus, school organization need to have an effective leader to administer changes at the school level properly.

Fullan (2001) states that principals who make changes have sophisticated thoughts. Ayob Jantan (2007) agrees that the principals who are successful in making changes are able to make his own paradigm shift in the school system itself. Instructional leaders are individuals who are responsible for organizing, developing and ensuring a positive attitude towards change in schools (Kursunoglu & Tanriogen, 2009). Therefore, the top leaders such as school principals are responsible to provide a healthy environment, in accordance with the National Philosophy of Education. The Ministry of Education also emphasizes the role of school leaders as instructional leaders in managing change in schools and gears students towards achieving Vision 2020.

Many researchers agree that the principal is the main factor in implementing change and innovation in schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Fullan, 2007). Principals must be prepared to face the challenges and changes in the new vision in order to bring success to the organization. The role of principals as instructional leaders especially in promoting the learning environment requires them to have positive attitude towards changes and this role is a crucial question that must be addressed. In this case, it is important that the principals realize their roles as instructional leaders, to promote learning environment and also to become change agents who are able to bring improvements into the organization.

As instructional leaders in promoting the school environment, principals shoulder heavy responsibilities in schools. So, what are the criteria for principals in secondary schools in Malaysia, to be generally successful as instructional leaders and demonstrates a positive attitude towards school change? Ahmad Zabidi Razak (2006) stated that school climate help to create a motivating learning environment, which help students to obtain better performance and enhance teachers' work satisfaction. Principals who are able to change their practice by promoting, encouraging and stimulating learning in the classroom will increase students' performance (Leithwood and Jantzi 2006). Many studies show that there is a correlation between school climate and students' success. If the school climate is good, teachers and students will be more motivated and at the same time teaching and learning will turn out well.

The study may serve as a guideline to the school principals in Malaysia to realize the need for a strong instructional leadership practice in promoting the learning environment and foster positive attitude in managing change, so as to improve school management.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

The framework of this research is built on a combination of the Instructional Leadership Model (Murphy, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1987). Attitude towards change is based on the model of Dunham et al. (1989).

Four dimensions of instructional leadership based on Hallinger and Murphy (1987) and Murphy (1990) used in this study are i) define and establish school goals, ii) manage instructional program, iii) **promote learning environment** and iv) create friendly and cooperative school environment. However, in this article, only one dimension that is **promoting the learning environment** will be discussed. This dimension of **promoting the learning environment** will be discussed based on six functions, namely (i) to protect instructional time, (ii) to maintain high visibility, (iii) to provide incentives to teachers, (iv) to promote professional development, (v) to provide incentives for students learning, and (vi) to establish standards and positive expectations.

Attitude towards change is based on the model by Dunham et al., (1989) which has been used by Kursunoglu and Tanriogen (2009) in their study on instructional leadership behaviors and its relation to attitude towards change in school organization. Attitude towards change is studied based on three aspects, namely cognitive, affective and behavioral. The Cognitive aspect refers to change of views on the advantages and disadvantages, benefits, requirements and knowledge needed to manage change. The Affective aspects refers to feelings associated with dissatisfaction and concern in making changes. The Behavioral aspect refers to the action taken or to be taken in the future in the face of change or in resisting change.

2. Method

The research design of this study is survey. According to Creswell (2008), survey method enables the researcher to collect data directly from the subject under review and to make generalizations onto the population. For quantitative data, a set of questionnaires were administered to the respondents.

2.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study is to explore the practice of one of the dimensions of instructional leadership, being **promoting the learning environment**. This study also focuses on the relationship between promoting learning environment and attitude towards change based on three aspects, being cognitive, affective and behavioural in secondary schools.

For these purposes, the following research questions have been formed:-

1. What are the levels of instructional leadership practice among principals in Pahang, Malaysia based on the dimension of promoting the learning environment?
2. What is the attitude towards change among principals in Pahang, Malaysia based on cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects?
3. Is there any relationship between promoting learning environment and principals' attitude towards change based on the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects?

2.2 Sample

The population of teachers is 10,978 and the selection of the samples was 161 of secondary school teachers in the state of Pahang. The sample was selected based on the multistage cluster sampling.

2.3 Instruments

This study used a set of questionnaire that was adapted from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) and an inventory of attitudes toward change as the main instrument. Researchers have obtained the permission from the original authors via email to administer the questionnaire. The instrument was translated to Malay Language and the reliability coefficient for the adapted instrument was 0.98. There were 40 items that measure the dimension **promoting the learning environment**. The instrument on attitude towards change was also translated into Malay Language and adapted to 36 items, with the reliability coefficient of 0.90 Cronbach Alpha. Each set of questionnaires consists of three parts: Part A, Part B and Part C. Likert scale scores were used for both PIMRS and attitude towards change. PIMRS rating subscale was from almost never to almost always; while the scale for attitude towards change ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

2.4 Data Analysis

Questionnaire data was analyzed using descriptive analysis such as mean and standard deviation in order to determine the practice level of promoting learning environment and to identify the principals' attitude towards change in schools. In this study, inferential statistics in the form of Pearson Correlation were used to describe the relationship between principals' practice in promoting the learning environment and attitude towards change in schools.

3. Results

The results indicates that secondary school teachers strongly agreed principals in Pahang, Malaysia promote learning environment functions that was (i) protect the instructional time, (ii) maintain high visibility, (iii) provide incentives to teachers, (iv) promote professional development, (v) provide incentives for students learning, and (vi) establish standards and positive expectations.

Table 1. Promoting learning environment: Teacher perceptions

Functions	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Interpretation
Protect the instructional time	3.93	.573	High
Maintain high visibility	3.92	.646	High
Provide incentives to teachers	4.02	.649	High

Promote professional development	4.19	.617	High
Provide incentives for students learning	3.94	.648	High
Establish standards and positive expectations.	4.05	.576	High
Domains Promoting Learning Environment	4.01	.537	High

It is also found that secondary school teachers agreed that principals in Pahang possess positive attitude towards change in the three aspects of cognitive, affective and behavioural.

Table 2. Principals attitude towards organizational change: Teacher perceptions

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Interpretation
Cognitive	4.20	.425	High
Affective	3.81	.472	High
Behavioural	4.00	.418	High
Attitude Towards Change	4.01	.383	High

Results in Table 3 shows that a strong relationship exists between four functions of promoting learning environment with Cognitive aspect of attitude towards change. These functions are i) maintain high visibility ($r=0.552$), ii) provide incentives to teachers ($r=0.556$), iii) promote professional development ($r=0.566$), and iv) establish standards and positive expectations ($r=0.565$). While strong relationship also exists between the functions of promote professional development ($r=0.515$) and establish standards and positive expectations ($r=0.527$) with the affective aspect. As for the behavioural aspect of attitude towards change, a strong relationship exists with i) protect instructional time ($r=0.514$), ii) maintain high visibility ($r=0.641$), iii) provide incentives to teachers ($r=0.528$), iv) promote professional development ($r=0.552$), and v) establish standards and positive expectations ($r=0.539$). However, a moderate relationship exists between the functions of provide incentive for students' learning ($r=0.469$) with behavioural aspect and maintain high visibility ($r=0.421$) and provide incentives to teachers ($r=0.439$) with the affective aspect. The result also show there exists a moderate relationship between the functions of provide incentive for students' learning with the aspects of Cognitive ($r=0.476$), Affective ($r=0.432$) and Behavioural ($r=0.469$). Nonetheless, only a low relationship exists between the functions of protect instructional time ($r=0.286$) with the Affective aspect of attitude towards change.

Table 3 Relationship between promoting learning environment and the principals attitude towards change.

Promoting learning environment	Cognitive <i>r value</i>	Affective <i>r value</i>	Behavioural <i>r value</i>
Protect the instructional time	0.440	0.286	0.514
Maintain high visibility	0.552	0.421	0.641
Provide incentives to teachers	0.556	0.439	0.528
Promote professional development	0.566	0.515	0.552
Provide incentives for students' learning	0.476	0.432	0.469
Establish standards and positive expectations.	0.565	0.527	0.539
Domains Promoting Learning Environment	0.601	0.493	0.630

4. Conclusion

This study tries to explore the practice of instructional leaders in promoting the learning environment through the six dimensions namely protecting instructional time, maintaining high visibility, providing incentives for teachers, promoting professional development, providing incentives for learning and having high expectations. This study also focuses on the relationship between promoting learning environment and attitudes towards change in schools based on the cognitive, affective and behavioural aspects.

Findings indicate that principals of secondary schools in Pahang State performed effectively as instructional leaders especially in promoting the learning environment in schools. Smith (1995) explained, school climate is influenced by leadership style of principal. According to the CDC (2009), comfortable learning environment will help the school to enhance students' learning performance. Therefore principals who promote a positive learning environment will successfully stimulate students' personal growth and academic achievement. At the same time they create a productive work environment for the teachers. Thus, it improves the academic performance of schools.

Findings also indicate that secondary school principals in Pahang, Malaysia possess positive attitude towards change. This is important because schools must accept any changes and embrace the changes in order to move in line with the current global changes (Hatch 2009). Principals are the main factor in implementing change and innovations in schools (Hoy & Miskel, 2005; Leithwood & Strauss, 2009; Fullan, 2007).

The study also found that there was a strong relationship between the functions of promote professional development and establish standards and positive expectation, but a moderate relationship between the functions of provide incentives for students' learning with Cognitive, Affective and Behavioural aspects of attitude towards change. However, it is interesting to note that a low relationship exists between the function of protect the instructional time with Affective aspect of attitude towards change. This is important as principals need to face challenges and changes in the new vision for the success of the organization (Azahari Salleh 2002).

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